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HOW IT FEELS TO SAIL ON A BONE-DRY SHIP

An Intrepid Tourist Aboard the President Harding Gives a Picture of the Vessel's First Voyage Under the No-Bar Ruling

"They'll Never Make This Pay," Said the Pessimist, Retiring for Solace to the Privacy of a "Wet" Stateroom, Stocked in Advance

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CLEAR and dry! So clear and so dry and so sunny, in fact, was the weather that it seemed as though the god of prohibition was looking with favor upon us. For this was the first dry trip of the steamship President Harding since the imperial rescript forbidding the sale of liquor on American ships had gone into effect, and curiosity was the prevailing feeling in our minds as we climbed the gangplank that led aboard the vessel at Hoboken that November morning.

Would there be a strict enforcement of the ruling or would it be a Broadway enforcement? Would there be dryness and an ensuing gloom or dampness and consequent hilarity? Right here our thoughts were stampeded by the fat man who was puffing up just ahead, for he caught his foot in one of the cleats on the gangplank and fell forward, revealing as he did so a flask of by no means small proportions parked in a convenient position. He turned around and smiled.

"They ain't gonna catch me," he said, showing that at least one member of the passenger list would be able to look without regret on the closed bar—if, indeed, it were closed. And then we passed on into the ship and read on the board at the head of the central staircase the following notice:

"Effective this date: The sale of liquor aboard this ship will stop."

Indeed, if there were any doubt remaining as to the enforcement of the edict one look at the gloomy face of the smoking room steward would have been eloquent. He admitted that the bar had been closed in midocean, and that, as far as he could see, it would never open. The captain and the chief officer, so he declared, had personally superintended the removing of the liquor to the hold and the sealing of it, and he mournfully suggested that it was as much good there as in Europe. Five thousand dollars' worth of liquor from other American ships was on board, he told us, being taken over to sell in Europe; this also was locked up, sealed and about as accessible as if it were in a bank president's cellar. Then I saw my fat friend of the gangplank, who was standing surveying the glistening bottles of White Rock on the shelves of the bar and listening to the sorrowful tones of the steward.

"Ah, you can get nothing out of him," he said. "They've closed this place up like a Y. M. C. A. But, say, I'm fixed all right. Some friends of mine that was wiser than I was sent me a case; yes sir, a whole case of it. Real stuff, too, from the ——," and he named one of the most exclusive hotels in New York. "Come down stairs and see for yourself."

"We Sailed the Ocean Blue," But Not So Very

There it was, in a locked closet in his locked stateroom. As he had said, a whole case of it—twelve bottles. It was without doubt the real stuff, Haig & Haig. Of this I am positive because he showed me the label on every bottle; but somehow it left me cold. It was the real thing of Europe that was wanted, not the real thing of America, so we climbed upstairs agreeing that the trip would be but a sorry thing. We should have taken the advice of those wiser than ourselves and canceled passage. Had not others done it? And what is there to do on ship board with the bar locked and sealed?

The fat man caught his foot in one of the cleats and revealed a flask of no small proportions

That is the frame of mind with which one went to bed at night; but it was a frame of mind hard to retain the next morning when there was nothing on the horizon but rippling waves and the air from the south blew warm against our faces. A laughing group of young people on deck made that attitude of the previous night seem childish, and gradually it became clear why it is impossible to remain in that state of mind very long on the President Harding.

Young Ship, Young Officers, For Young America

First of all it is a ship manned by the young for the young. The captain himself is but little over forty, the chief officer something under, and the chief engineer, who was with the President Harding when she was merely a thing of plates and ribs and went with her on her maiden trip and has been with her ever since, is younger still. They are typical seamen; but they are young, the oldest of them the captain; the youngest boys were not even in the navy during the war. Most of them were, however, some on the Leviathan, or one of the other German ships, and they are all members of the naval reserve. The chief steward, Billy Linn, for instance, at twenty-eight was chief steward of the Leviathan, a ship of 50,000-odd tons. Probably at that age he was the youngest chief steward on the Atlantic. And with the typical ingenuity of young America he has gone the ships of the older nations one better by proving that it is possible to be as busy and active on board ship as it is at a Long Island country club. After you have seen what he has done you wonder no one ever thought of it before, but, afloat as ashore, it is always the obvious that is overlooked.

Every ship has shuffleboard, quoits and the usual kind of deck games which no one would think of wasting time playing on shore. To Mr. Linn came the idea of attempting to make it possible to play some of the games on board ship that can be played on land and, due partly to the construction of the vessel and partly to his own inventiveness, he achieved his desire. The President Harding was laid down as a transport originally, but when the armistice came she was only half completed and was converted into a passenger ship. For this reason she has a far greater amount of unobstructed deck space than have the other steamers, and this feature he used to his advantage. At one end of the ship, directly over the veranda café, he found room enough to lay out a tennis court. This court is just like any board court, with lines marked out and a regular net. For backstops wiring is rigged to a height of about eight feet around the court, fastened on iron uprights. Nor is it hardly necessary to say that this court is crowded all day and that the little reservation board in the lower lobby is usually full long before the breakfast bugle is blown at 8 o'clock.

Three of them left Mr. Simpson's stateroom long after midnight and passed up and down the corridors knocking at all the doors and assuring the occupants they would be in the Grand Central Terminal in twelve minutes

It so happens that Mr. Linn himself is a golf fan, and at the other end of this top deck has rigged up a golf net, where the golfers gather daily in the morning sun to swing their clubs and try out various shots. Bunkers, cleverly arranged by the stewards and playable from different angles, add to the interest. There was seldom a minute during the seven days of the trip that this end of the ship was not occupied, the benches behind filled with those waiting their turn to play. On most ships the movement of the boat would make games like golf or tennis impossible, but the President Harding is of great tonnage and extremely steady, and on this voyage carried 7,000 bags of mail for England, France and Germany and the largest cargo that had been taken into Bremen since the armistice. There was, therefore, not a single day between Hoboken and Cherbourg when the top deck was not filled with a crowd of people waiting to play or playing their favorite games.

Indeed, it was not until the third day out that I remembered that the bar was closed. That was when my fat friend joined me and began to lament the fact that things were not what they used to be. He was charmingly morbid and foretold horrible things for the line.

"They'll never make it pay, now they've closed the bar," he said.

The shouts and bursts of laughter coming down from the upper deck made this hard to believe.

"They tell me they have 8,000 bags of mail on board," I ventured to reply. "Seven thousand bags of mail at $8 is $56,000. That ought to about clear the passage expenses without the freight or passengers counted in."

"They can't make it pay. The right kind of people won't travel on these boats with the bar closed. Look at the service. And the towels in the staterooms. Do you call them linen, do you?"

I answered meekly that I didn't call them anything; that I merely used them to wipe my hands on.

"Say, I know what linen is. Look here," and he flourished a card in my face; "James M. Simpson, that's me; connected with the biggest store in New York. Buy all their linen, I do. Why, I make two or three trips a year across the water; don't think anything more of a week on the ocean than a ride on the Erie.

He was charmingly morbid and foretold horrible things for the line "They'll never make it pay, now they've closed the bar," he said

And believe me, I know linen when I see it. Say, they'll never make these boats pay in a thousand years."

Before embarking perhaps I would have agreed with this, but after three or four days on board his remark seemed a little strong, for there was everything on the President Harding that there is on other liners and a good many things that no other boat possesses. Palm gardens and tea rooms are all very well, but even the American who has existed four years in a prohibition country gets soon tired of sitting in a smoking room wrapped around a glass of beer. That is, he does if there are things on board more worth while than the aforesaid glass of beer, and these things there are on the President Harding.

Exhilaration of Jazz Music Rather Than Alcohol

Take the matter of dancing, for instance. Most ships have ballrooms and tearooms, but a more ingenious idea has been worked out on this American vessel. Owing to the peculiar construction of the ship there is a large, square place on the promenade deck about 200 feet long and some sixty feet wide. On one side against the wall a piano has been built in, and there every night the ship's jazz band plays for dancing. The glass enclosed promenade can be so shut in at both ends as to make it airtight, whereas on hot evenings the windows are open and the doors at the ends flung back, which makes it like dancing on a New York roof garden. The piano during the day can be turned into a player piano, and is run by electricity, while in the salon is a baby grand and a victrola. Certainly there is nothing lacking in the musical line that the stores of New York can furnish.

But unfortunately Mr. Simpson was not musical; he did not dance and he had never learned golf, so his chief amusement was to surround himself with one or two companions and punish his supply of Haig & Haig. These gatherings would continue well along into the night and once, long after midnight, three of them left Mr. Simpson's stateroom and passed up and down the corridors knocking on the doors of all the rooms, assuring the occupants that they would be in the Grand Central terminal in twelve minutes. Among others they woke up the newly appointed American Minister to the Baltic States, but he was young and not easily disturbed, so he took it as a joke. Not so did a famous Metropolitan opera singer, who complained the next day to the captain in such terms that Mr. Simpson was requested to call at the bridge and emerged therefrom very red in the face, muttering to himself: "They'll never make this thing pay, never!"

And that was the extent of the liquor question on board. One neither saw nor, indeed, thought very much about it. As Chief Steward Billy Linn said one day: "Booze? Booze? Why, there's too much to do on this boat to bother with it. That's all right on those boats where the smoking room is the only place the men have to get away by themselves, but we never found it like that on the Harding. Say, two trips ago we had several days when the bar receipts ran around two dollars! Would you believe that?"

I wouldn't—that is, I wouldn't until he took me down to his office and dug out the papers showing the run, date and amount of money spent in the smoking room. There it was: "Wednesday, September 20, 1922. Bar, $2.25."

Hard indeed to believe that a crowd of one hundred and fifty-odd prohibition-soaked Americans could consume only $2.25 worth of liquor in twenty-four hours, but there it was in black and white. Mr. Linn turned to the records of the deck steward for the same date: "Eleven ginger ales, served on deck, $2.75."

Not Much Drinking Even When Bar Was Open

"Guess that tells the story," he said, closing his books. "And the stewards get a percentage on all liquor sold, so you can see it was to our interest to sell it. But we're all glad to see it off. It was a lot of trouble and made a lot of feeling sometimes. That is, we will be glad if it doesn't hurt the ship."

That is the thing these men always think of first—the ship. Their loyalty to her is shown by everything they say or do. The President Harding is a seven-day boat. Indeed, there are but five or six faster in the trans-Atlantic run, and our chief officer, Mr. Beebe, at one time executive officer on the Leviathan, was on the President Adams for more than two years. The President Adams is one of the second class boats which the line runs from London to New York, smaller than the President Harding by 5,000 tons and much slower, as it takes her ten days to complete the journey. Nevertheless, Mr. Beebe was homesick for the President Adams.

"Just had a wireless from my old captain on the President Adams," he said one night as he came down to dinner. "Yes, she was a good boat. What's that? Oh, yes, the President Harding is all right, but we used to have some great times on the President Adams." And then as we would draw him out he would become indignant. "Food every bit as good as it is on here. Why, just the same food exactly. Not a bit of difference in food or service. Well, yes, she is a little slower. Yes, a little smaller, too. But she's a great boat; steady; take any kind of a sea at all."

Only with the utmost reluctance would he admit the superiority of the bigger ship.

One and all, these men who knew and loved the vessel that they sailed with in good and bad weather were unable to understand the attitude of the American public because numerous cancellations had been received at the offices of the line, due to the order closing the bar on board. They were unable to understand why people should choose a ship because liquor was or was not sold. They understood why a person would choose another boat if he believed it better, but it hurt them to think Americans deserted them to go across on foreign lines merely because they could not, as one officer remarked, "wait seven days for a drink." It was as if a member of one's own family had been insulted in one's hearing—had been slandered and was powerless to act in defense. They were proud of their ship—proud that she had attractions that no other vessel on the Atlantic possessed, proud that she was the fastest American ship running to European ports, and because they were proud of her they felt it keenly when cancellations of passage were received because liquor was no longer to be obtained on board.

Seven Glorious Days, "Clear and Dry"

So passed seven glorious sunlit days, while the ship tore off her 400 miles every twenty-four hours, and one was no more awake and on deck than it was 11 o'clock at night and the steward was coming around with a plate of sandwiches. Time, that usually hangs so heavily upon one on an ocean voyage, was not long enough in the merry company of young people that crowded the upper deck or danced in the evening to the strains of one of the two bands. Hardly did it seem like a day, when one evening the lights of shore began to sparkle and glitter and the bump of Plymouth Hoe came nearer and nearer. Far below was a red and green light that meant the tender waiting for mail and passengers to England, and in the powerful light that pierced the water below the side of the boat one could make out a tiny rowboat tossing and shifting through the choppy waves. Nearer and nearer she came and then a huge door in the side of the steamer opened and a rope ladder was let down the ten-odd feet to the water's edge. A figure from the rowboat in coat and derby—why do trans-Atlantic pilots always wear coats and derbies?—grasped the rope ladder and climbed aboard. It was then I heard the voice of the ship's doctor as he passed by, talking to one of the passengers.

"Yes, Mr. Simpson is quite sick; ptomaine poisoning, I believe. I'm going to have him taken off on a stretcher here and sent to the hospital in Plymouth."